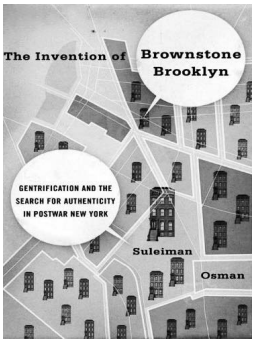

The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn
Suleiman Osman
Reviewed by Daniel Widis

Few can argue about the transformative and profound impact of gentrification on the postwar American urban landscape. While academic journals and newspaper editorials continue to swell with contrasting pieces on the blessings and/or ills of this "back to the city" urbanism, Suleiman Osman's brilliant *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* steers clear of making any sort of explicit value judgment. While Osman's work is ostensibly an urban history of gentrification in New York City's most populous borough, the true subject is not the place, but the characters that give it life. In teasing out the attitudes, convictions, and values of the gentrifiers, or "brownstoners," and the many times contradictory impulses that drove them to recreate and "reimagine" a forgotten urban landscape, Osman creates a truly memorable and powerful piece of scholarship.

By the end of World War II, the area known as South Brooklyn was a "polycultural, polycentric and polyhistorical cityscape." Disgusted with the sterility of suburbia and desperate for diversity and "authenticity," young, highly educated professionals began moving to Brooklyn's oldest, but now largely depressed, residential district, Brooklyn Heights. A neighborhood ravaged by the flight of wealthy residents to the nascent suburbs in the early 20th century, Brooklyn Heights' once majestic brownstones were in severe disrepair. While the rehabilitation of these structures and the revitalizing of their urban environment were the most visible elements of this new "brownstoning" movement, its heart and soul was a "do-it-yourself", counterculture ideology that would have a profound impact on the social, political, and physical environment of the American city.

Osman argues that many of these "brownstoners" imagined themselves as urban pioneers building settlements in the wilderness"—out to reclaim, rediscover, and rehabilitate an urban environment lost to decades of decay. Brooklyn Heights quickly became the "birthplace of a new romantic urban ideal", a jarring juxtaposition to the "dominant modernist ideology of the 1950s." With Brooklyn Heights providing both the ideological and physical foundation, brownstoners ventured further into South Brooklyn through the 1960s and 70s, renovating, recreating, and, most importantly according to Osman, reimagining neighborhoods as they went.

Unfortunately, like colonists centuries before them, the landscapes that Brownstoner's physically altered were not vacant and empty. Osman brilliantly, and objectively, describes the instances of conflict and cooperation between these new "settlers" and communities that had existed there for decades. While partnerships did exist, and at many times were highly successful, Osman argues that the politicizing of this brownstoning ideology, as much socially liberal as it was opposition to centralized, big government, helps to explain the death of New Deal liberalism.

The brilliance of Osman's work is at times its most frustrating aspect. Left without a compass by the author, the reader is forced to confront his or her own messy opinions on class, race, and gentrification. There are no heroes and villains in Osman's narrative. Instead, there are just competing characters, all with their own values, hopes, and dreams contesting a single urban space. For those looking for an incredibly thought-provoking, detailed account of the motivations, confrontations, and at times hypocrisies, of the gentrification movement, Suleiman Osman's *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* is a must read.

Daniel Widis is a first-year DCRP student specializing in Placemaking and Real Estate Development. A North Carolina native, his interests are in urban design, neighborhood development, and the adaptive reuse of historic properties.